

Eliza Bannister Walker: A Profile in Protests, Poems, and Purpose

~ Eric Wilson, Executive Director, Rockbridge Historical Society
For Lexington News-Gazette, March 8, 2017

With her feather-flourished hat, her determined countenance, and her long, purposeful gaze, a photograph of Eliza Bannister Walker looks out across the span of a century, assured witness to her local impact on this community. Born in the wake of the Civil War in 1874, and buried in Lexington's Evergreen Cemetery in 1939 on the eve of World War II, Eliza B. Walker left her mark here as a civic leader and a singer, as a poet and political campaigner, as a leading figure in First Baptist Church, and an advocate for local business.



**Two striking photographic portraits of Eliza Bannister Walker, ca. 1910s-20s
Unless otherwise noted, all photos in this article come from the Walker-Wood
Family Collections at Washington & Lee University Special Collections Library.**

Across this range of commitments – and in many ways, a model before her time – Walker gave voice to many of the communal priorities and colors of cultural life that women and men still jointly strive towards today. And her portrait of social activism appears especially timely here: both in the midst of Women's History Month (today, March 8, is International Women's Day, established in 1911 during the cresting Women's Suffrage Movement) and still in the cross-light of February's Black History Month (first advanced by Carter Woodson in 1926).

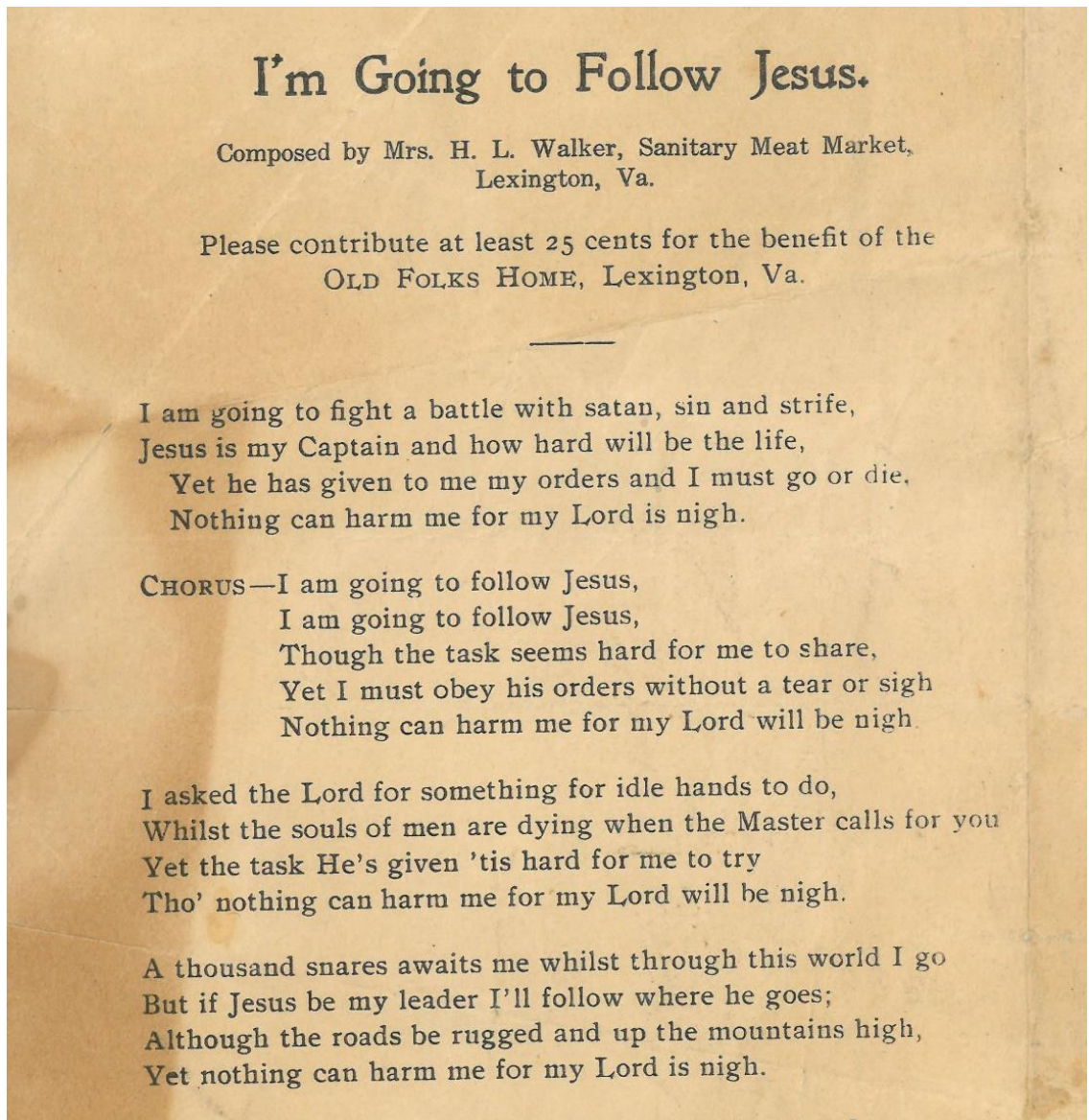
More has been written about Eliza's husband, Harry Lee Walker: his leadership as a Deacon at First Baptist Church, his service in fraternal organizations and, most notably, his entrepreneurial success as the founder and longtime proprietor of one of Lexington's commercial pillars, Walker & Wood Brothers "Lexington Market." Further generations come to life in the rich documentary and photographic records in the Walker & Wood family papers at Washington & Lee (their bequest was featured in a 2007 article by The News-Gazette). Historic Lexington Foundation's brochure on the historic buildings of Diamond Hill provides an inviting glimpse of the Walkers' neighborhood at large, as do the inviting family and community memories chronicled in Dr. Beverly Tucker's recent book, The House on Fuller Street.



Walker & Wood Brothers' "Lexington Market" and Butcher Shop, 30 N. Main Street. One of Lexington's most successful downtown stores, the building was bought and operated by Eliza's husband, supported by their nearby farm. Later known as the Willson-Walker house, in nod to his influence, it is now the home to Macado's.

But as the archive unfolds, it's clear that there's much more of Eliza Walker's story to be told, especially as audiences turn more frequently to histories and 'hidden figures' that have been less commonly highlighted. Her own capacity to provide an early 20th century profile – duly voiced in protests and in poems – adds meaningfully to the work of the Rockbridge Historical Society, including oral histories recorded from her descendants fifteen years ago. New discoveries in her own writings, and accounts from contemporary newspapers, will add further depth and diversity to the projects RHS will be sharing with local schools this spring, just as they did to programs like February's walking tour chronicling local African-American history.

While Eliza Walker's family ties and sociable networks warrant attentions of their own, two threads of her civic and cultural passions are most distinctively stitched together: her range of social campaigns, and the place of poetry for both public and personal expression. Over the course of four decades, her letters and appeals demonstrate her determined advocacy for the poor, orphans, the elderly, and civil rights for African-Americans, in both local, regional, and national contexts. Her verse takes up many of those issues as well; in fact, some were published to raise money the charitable causes she founded and fought for.



One of many religious poems Walker wrote and printed as handbills as fundraisers for a new 'colored' Old Folks Home and Orphanage in Lexington (ca.1920). Note her use of her husband's successful meat market, as a credibility cue.

But her unique cache of manuscript poems also reveals a creative side, sensitive to different artistic forms, and crafting lyrics that also resonated with her talents as a noted singer in the “Charity Nightingales” (a group that frequently performed in the area). The process of properly editing those poems is just beginning. But her lines (often hastily penciled and penned on the stationery of her husband’s store) reveal an engagement with lyric traditions and hymns she’d evidently studied, yet which were also evolving into the more modernist keys of the early 20th century. Her poetic structure and voice echo some of the hymns and refrains she knew deeply at core. But they also show her playing with the precedents of other black poets, as well as wider regional and national vernaculars with more distinctive grain and rhythm.

In addition to her experiments in style, Walker’s verse foregrounds her relevance in speaking to contemporary issues. No less than her more overtly political appeals, her poems shed uniquely local light on many of the broader arcs of American History: the rise of “the new woman” in the 1920s, and the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance; the shift from the spirited play of the “Jazz Age,” the constraints of Jim Crow, and the coming of the Great Depression. And yet they also resonate here in local context, colored in distinct variations.”

Walker’s public letters – some broadly published, some crisply addressed to organizations and community leaders, some even rendered into verse – demonstrate what Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., a half century later, would characterize as “the fierce urgency of now.” Like King, Walker’s understanding of contemporary social needs, as well as the collective responsibility needed to address them, was grounded centrally in her church. One of her poems yokes spiritual deliverance and social justice by reference to the Exodus and the Promised Land, long a staple of spirituals, and a refrain in the Civil Rights Era ahead: “But Moses hand was on the rod/ Stand still and see the glory of God./ Then God told Moses what to do,/ Lead the children, Lead them through.”

A chorus can be compelling, but Walker would also use her organizational acumen to cultivate social change through more patently political outlets. As founder and President of the Walker-Rockbridge chapter of the Virginia Federation for Colored Women, she would host the statewide conference in 1921 at her home at Blandome, and at First Baptist Church, just down Henry Street.



1921 Conference of the Virginia Federation of Colored Women, held at Blandome (Henry & Tucker St., the home of Eliza Walker, President of the Local Chapter.

In 1931, the chapter and church would also host a speech by the first African-American Congressman elected outside of the South, Chicago's U.S. Representative Oscar dePriest. In a remarkable protest poem, Walker insists on the need for national solidarity in supporting dePriest's groundbreaking efforts. To approach this contemporary issue, Eliza Walker would adopt and adapt the narrative persona of Aunt Chloe, popularized by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper in a series of poems written just after the Civil War. Walker looks to have found common chord in Harper's wide range of social concerns: addressing the fragility of family and the threats of war, the consolations of religion, Lincoln's political leadership, as well as the "ugly tricks" of electoral corruption addressed in 'Aunt Chloe's Politics.'"

Fifty years after the failures of Reconstruction, Walker draws on Harper's familiar precedent to frame a satirical, dialect poem taking Chicago's black voters to task for not supporting dePriest more fully, and squandering their vulnerable voting rights by selling them to others. In "Aunt Chloe Quarrels over the Campaign," Walker's Virginia-based narrator opens in a spirit of passionate crisis, highly invested from afar: "Well I thought I'd stop reading de papers/ For I couldn't bar de news./ Chicago folks kept grumblin'/ And got things all confused." A few

stanzas later, she points more insistently at the reader: “Sure while he’s dare let him stay dare/
And send us another./ And see that you don’t do a thing/ To under mind your broder/ Why you’s
dis acting crazy folks/ Had sense enough to know – / If dey got out this time,/ Dey wouldn’t git
back no more.”

Walker spoke to many social causes, and she funded and founded many organizations that would help to provide a social safety net through community support, when governments might not come through. As Chairman of the Committee on the Unemployed, she typed an appeal to “the white citizens of Lexington” arguing for the protection of jobs and wages, as hard times find “that our places are being filled by imported servants very often cheaper than the accustomed pay to our local servants.” The immediacy of poverty and hunger stalks many of her poems, with social indifference adding further bite: “If you are poorly clad, hungry, white or black,/ Dey won’t giv you a thing to eat or noting on yo’ back.” More hopefully, she also scripted marching couplets that nod colloquially to the New Deal commitments of F.D.R.: “Rusevelt dun just what he sayed/ When we were hungray he gave us bred.../ He grabed this Country in his fist/ And turned it around without a miss.”

But Walker’s most celebrated and consistent campaigns worked to support Lexington’s oldest and youngest. In December 1917, Judge Holt approved Mrs. H.L. Walker’s application for a Charter for “The Lexington Old Folks Home and Orphanage.” As President of its Board of Directors, and backed by the references of some of Lexington’s most noted white and black citizens, she published a number of her broadsheet poems specifically inviting 25 cent contributions to the new institution, as highlighted just under the title. African-American newspapers in Washington, DC (where she had formerly trained as a midwife) also attest to her campaign to sell “Memorial Blocks” to finance the building in Lexington. One illustrated ad in the ‘Washington Eagle’ in January 1920 draws her personally laying a brick. And her edifying commitment is flanked by *bona fides* from leaders in DC, New York City, Pittsburgh, Columbus, OH, Richmond, and Lexington itself, in humbly drawn witness to her social ministry.


Help Her Build It - Buy a Memorial Block - Now! -

LEXINGTON MEMORIAL OLD FOLK'S
 HOME AND ORPHANAGE

Rev. J. I. Marshall WASH. D.C.	MORRIS CAFETERIA RICHMOND, VA	COLUMBIA LODGE ELKS - WASH. D.C.
Mrs. Bessie Briggs WASH. D.C.	DR. I. THEO. PARKER WASH. D.C.	DIXIE SCOTT LEXINGTON, VA
"LUCKY" ROBERTS NEW YORK CITY	REV. WILMAN WOOD WASH. D.C.	S.A. WAR VETERANS WASH. D.C.
BUY A BLOCK.		
YOUR CLUB SHOULD BUY ONE		
YOUR CHURCH SHOULD BUY ONE.		



ALL OF US



MRS. H.L. WALKER



REV. G. B. HOWARD PITTS. PA.	JANILEY WILSON THE EAGLE WASH. D.C.	REV. W. R. BROWN MTTS. PA.
REV. E. CARTER PITTS. PA.		
REV. J. ASHBURN COL. D.		
DR. A. BROWN RICH. VA.		
MRS. GEORGINA PHILA. PA.		
REV. E. COLEMAN GOLDSBORO, N.C.		
HOWARD DENTAL CLINIC, WASH. D.C.		
Wm. M. DAVIS WASH. D.C.		
WRIGHTS' EDG. ORIENTAL LODGE		
PROF. J. S. HARRIS N.C. MO.		
REV. STANTON LEXINGTON, VA.		

NOT A SHADOW BUT A REALITY. THIS HOME WILL BE BUILT OF CEMENT BLOCKS AND A MEMORIAL BLOCK WILL BE PLACED IN ITS WALL FOR EACH CONTRIBUTOR. LET US MAKE A BLOCK FOR YOUR CHURCH, LODGE, SELF, ETC. ADDRESS LEXINGTON OLD FOLK'S HOME 67 1832-9TH ST., NW.

Advertisement published in *The Washington Eagle* (1920), soliciting contributions to fund the building of a “Lexington Old Folk’s Home & Orphanage.” Mrs. H.L. Walker is pictured at right, laying the foundation; “All of Us” are pictured on the right, by turns. Note the wide geographical range of community leaders who are listed to vouch for her.

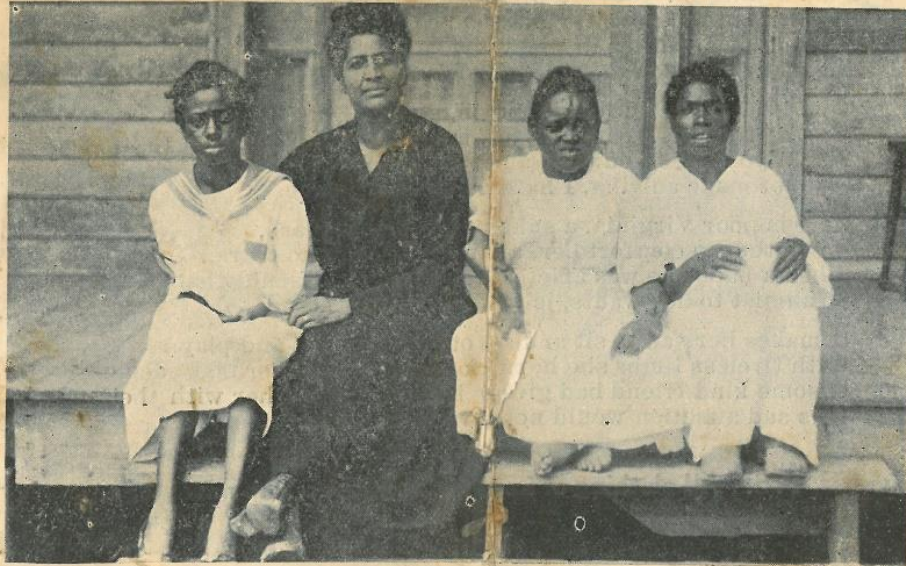
Most poignantly, a photograph shows Mrs. Walker proudly, maternally sitting on the porch with three of the orphaned girls she has drawn into care, captioned “Violet, Born without Hands”; “Virginia, Cannot Walk”; “Annie, Cannot Talk.” Ever savvy, Walker would use that photograph to front postcards and other fundraising mailers to solicit needed financial support. One batch, pitched during World War I, is boldly addressed “The Colored Soldiers Appeal: Help the Suffering of our Race.” Another includes another of Walker’s original poems, “The Orphans’ Plea,” which dramatically speaks in the first person as Violet, only to shift central attention to her friend: “Here is poor Virginia, a sufferer for many years,/ No mother to comfort her, a life of sorrow and tears./ When a babe she was afflicted, there was no friendly hand/ To administer her wants, is why she cannot stand.”

To the Public:
The Colored Soldier's Appeal

HELP THE SUFFERING OF OUR RACE

Buy a Memorial Block and Help us to Take Care
of the Colored Old Folks and Needy Orphan Children.
We are Asking Someone to Educate Little Violet.

MEMORIAL BLOCK

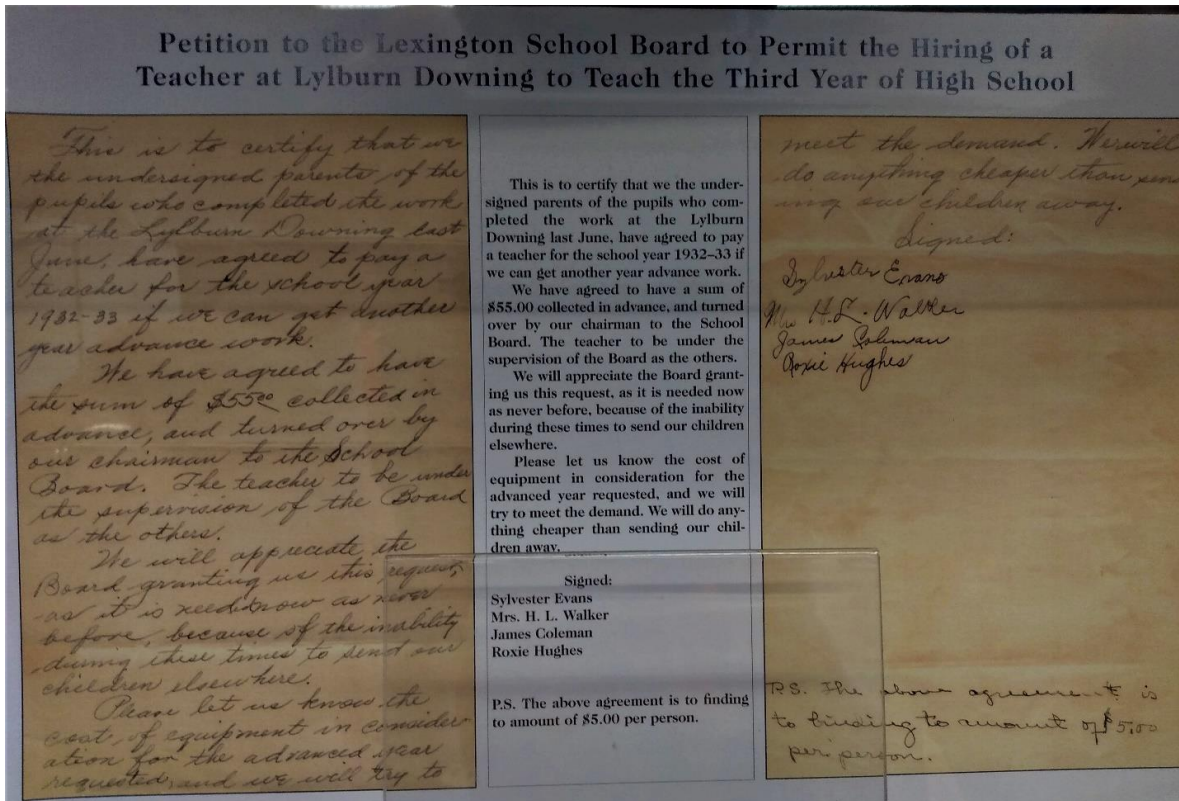


Violet Mrs. H. L. Walker Virginia Annie
An Orphan Freak Pres. of Lexington's Old Cannot Walk Cannot Talk
Born without Hands Folks Home and Orphanage

A third strategy in Walker's fundraising campaign, along with her poems and the newspaper ads: an appeal postcard sent directly to potential donors, capitalizing on the new service and sacrifice of African-American soldiers in World War I to spur others to do their part.

More playfully, yet no less purposefully, Eliza Walker enlisted children themselves to rally support for their own segregated schools. As recalled by her grandson Alexander Wood, she rented a bus and filled it with schoolchildren. They rode through the streets, children ringing the bells she gave them, to call attention to the state of the city's separate but unequal schools. Even after Lylburn Downing School opened in 1927, she joined fellow neighbors and parents to push for the hiring of another teacher, with the additional grade level helping to advance

students' opportunities yet further (at the time, students were only able to attend through the 10th grade, requiring them to study or move elsewhere, to gain a high school degree). This, in the mid-1930s: in the teeth of the Depression, twenty years before the Brown vs. Board Supreme Court decision, and thirty before the desegregation of schools in Lexington.



1932 Petition, signed by Mrs. H.L. (Eliza) Walker, asking that the Lexington School Board hire an additional teacher (salary to be paid by the parents themselves), so that students could advance through three years of high school. At the time, Lylburn Downing School only extended through 10th grade; so to get a high school degree, students would have to study elsewhere, or move.

Eliza Walker practiced what she had poetically preached: “Lead the children, Lead them through.” Her range of community service set a high standard, often creatively served through poetry and song, the kinds of service echoed in so many different local community organizations today. But her standard also provides a unique measure to look back through history, and to see how this community has evolved, over a century, with many needs since met, and others unmet still. To turn the lens on Eliza Walker’s Lexington is to see an era with challenges, opportunities, and contradictions, each of which put our own in relief, in turn.